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IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: During the Ambassador's September 19 trip to Kontum, he highlighted the contributions the USG and international NGOs are making in the province, including the recent opening of a USAID-funded ethnic minority boarding school. Kontum leaders were open to the idea of further US cooperation and investment, especially in education, health and tourism. The Ambassador also met with the Bishop of Kontum to discuss his efforts to reinvigorate church operations in the diocese and the challenges of serving the province's Catholic population, who account for 75 percent of the province's 170,000 religious adherents. End summary.

USAID-EMW School Opening in Kon Ray

¶12. (SBU) On September 19, the Ambassador helped kick off the opening of a new ethnic minority boarding school in Kon Ray district, a joint GVN-USG-NGO effort that will expand educational access to the province's most disadvantaged children. The school is entirely wheelchair accessible, and includes a vocational training workshop, computer lab, library, and boarding facilities for 240 students. Representatives of the implementing NGO East Meets West (EMW) said similar schools they have opened in other provinces usually see a doubling in enrollment within a year, and they fully expect the same to happen in Kontum.

¶13. (SBU) The school addresses many of the challenges unique to ethnic minority students, including the long distances most children must travel in order to get to schools normally located in provincial and district towns located far from the rural areas where most ethnic minority groups live. For many children who do attend boarding schools in urban centers, the culture shock and homesickness they experience as a result of living far from their communities, often for the first time in their lives, also inhibits their learning experience and contributes to the high drop out rates reported for students transitioning from primary to secondary institutions (ref A). Kontum Bishop "Michael" Hoang Duc Oanh noted that these cultural differences are exacerbated by socioeconomic changes. As economic development projects take up more agricultural land, ethnic minority adults have moved deeper into forest areas to continue their traditional farming practices, leaving their children at home with little adult supervision. The lack of discipline leaves them ill-prepared for a structured school regimen once they leave home.

¶14. (SBU) The Kon Ray boarding school addresses some of these issues by literally bridging the gap for students by being situated close to ethnic minority communities, rather than in the district center. Students will be able to go home for

holidays and weekends more easily and parents will also be able to visit their children and participate in school programs more often. The project also successfully enlisted the support--both financially and logistically--of local officials in the region. EMW said local officials worked closely with the contractor and the NGO to ensure the project closed on time and under budget, including linking the school to water and power lines just days before the official handover. EMW representatives added that the high level of commitment by local officials boded well in terms of ensuring continued financial support to keep the school up and running.

Kontum People's Committee Welcome NGOs

15. (SBU) People's Committee Chairman Ha Ban welcomed the Ambassador and HCMC Poloff, noting he was pleased by the increase in visits from U.S. Mission officers and hoped more USG delegations would continue to come to Kontum. Chairman Ban pledged his continued support for the work of international NGOs in Kontum, including Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped (VNAH) and World Vision. Chairman Ban welcomed the Ambassador's news regarding the upcoming USAID needs assessment to determine other areas where the USG can support development, noting that education and health projects are especially desired. Ban said secondary boarding schools were now present in all nine provincial districts, and assured the Ambassador all the schools welcomed students regardless of their ethnic background or religion. Chairman Ban said 42 percent of provincial residents practiced religion, with the overwhelming majority being Catholics (75 percent), Buddhists (16 percent), Protestants (8 percent) and Cao Dai (1 percent) accounted for the rest of the province's 170,000 believers. The Chairman added that 50 percent of Kon Tum residents belong to ethnic minority groups.

16. (SBU) Turning to economic development, the Chairman outlined many of the challenges Kontum faces in terms of attracting foreign investment due to its landlocked position, mountainous

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terrain and lack of adequate transportation networks. Only 600km of the province's 2,000km road network is paved, leaving most roads subject to severe damage from torrential storms during the rainy season. Looking to the future, the Chairman pinned great hopes on increased economic growth via transportation connections to the East-West Highway, new hydroelectric power projects and efforts to promote ecotourism in the province's few forested areas.

17. (SBU) The Ambassador welcomed the Chairman's support for ethnic and religious diversity as well as the efforts officials were making to improve bilateral cooperation, including the participation of Kontum officials in the Humanitarian Resettlement Section's recent workshop on U.S. refugee admissions June 30 in Ho Chi Minh City. The Ambassador said the increased exchanges by officials on both sides will help promote better understanding of the changes taking place in the Central Highlands in the United States.

Catholics Cautiously Optimistic

18. (SBU) During his lunch with Bishop "Michael" Hoang Duc Oanh, the Ambassador discussed the long history of the Catholic Church in the region, beginning with the arrival of French missionaries back in the 16th century. Today, Bishop Oanh's diocese covers both Kontum and neighboring Gia Lai province, encompassing 344 parishes with 220,000 followers. Bishop Oanh, who was sent by the Archbishop of Hanoi to serve in the region in 1969, said conditions for Catholics have improved since the new legal framework on religion went into effect in 2005. The Church is negotiating with local authorities to expand and rebuild churches, but the Bishop's main concern was finding and training enough new priests to serve the diocese's burgeoning number of followers.

19. (SBU) The Bishop said government leaders welcomed the Church's growing role in charitable activities, but remained

mute on the issue of granting official approval for the Church's educational and training programs. He noted that despite the lack of legal status, some of the first children to attend his new kindergarten classes were the sons and daughters of provincial leaders. Bishop Oanh hoped these activities would someday receive official sanction, and was cautiously optimistic regarding the expanding opportunities for the region's ethnic minorities, noting authorities were "trying their best."

¶10. (SBU) Comment: As one of the poorest and most logistically challenged provinces in the Central Highlands, Kontum presents a good opportunity for future USG assistance, especially given the increasingly open attitude of local leaders to religious organizations and international NGOs working on health and education programs. Unlike Gia Lai and Dak Lak, Kontum has a significantly lower number of illegal migrants to Cambodia, and there are fewer reports of hostile encounters between provincial authorities and ethnic minority groups. Part of the reason for this could be the relatively low level of large-scale economic development programs that has spurred resentment over GVN land use policies in neighboring provinces, resulting in ethnic minorities demonstrating over the loss of their ancestral lands to coffee and rubber plantations.

¶11. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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